

## **Writing as transformative space? Examining the development of new lecturers through reflective writing (0023)**

### ***Becoming an HE lecturer***

Commencing employment within higher education is widely recognised as a challenging time (Knight & Trowler, 1999). When new lecturers take on this role following a sustained period of research they have established identities as researchers. However, a proportion of new lecturers enter through non-traditional routes, where their expertise has been established in a profession, where workplace expectations differ from those of a university (Boyd & Harris, 2010). These experienced professionals undergo a period of negotiation with new organisational drivers, to develop a new professional identities and establish their credibility as lecturers. Supporting experienced professionals to engage with research has been recognised as easing this transition (Harrison & McKeon, 2010). Through engagement with research they can familiarise themselves with practices that will inform their future development and enhance their teaching.

### ***Lessons from the South West***

A University in South West England developed a funding programme for new HE lecturers to promote their engagement with research and scholarly activity (Turner *et al.*, 2009). They were encouraged to use their own practice as the source of their inquiries, drawing on literature and the advice of research mentors to develop robust projects. These projects allowed funded study of student learning, in-depth examination of teaching and research of professional practice. Whilst embracing the research process, many of these HE lecturers identified the process of writing as challenging. Although not unanticipated, this appeared to present a barrier to their development.

### ***Methodology***

Richardson & St Pierre (1997) present writing as a mode of inquiry whereby an individual can construct meaning out of historical events and social knowledge. The process of writing can prompt reflections and questions which situates writing in different aspects of an individual's life. A writing group was established for a group of these previously funded lecturers, and through a series of activities, we sought to normalise the practice of writing (Turner *et al.*, 2009). Being mindful of the work of Richardson & St Pierre (1997), we wanted to provide these novice writers with an accessible subject, and given their shared experiences as fund holders in the earlier projects, we identified this

phases in their professional development as the subject of participants' writing. The writing produced (initial submissions and reflective narratives) and a post group questionnaire designed to capture their ongoing development were analysed using the constant-comparative approach to examine their development as HE lecturers (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

### ***Operating on the peripheries***

These HE lecturers were working in various educational environments where research was a supplementary aspect of practice (Anderson *et al.*, 2003). Their funded research went largely unrecognised and required considerable self motivation. This self motivation was attributed to the desire to develop professionally and engage with external communities. In their writing they identified links between being an HE lecturer and being research active. Interestingly neither this reliance on self motivation (to seek funding, undertake their work and disseminate their findings) nor the lack of recognition were experienced as barriers. Rather they served to empower. Undertaking work that is on the periphery of institutional agendas has been identified as a "safe way" for novice researchers to develop their confidence and experience in research (Harrison & McKeon, 2010). Gaining a sense of personal achievement in research projects can contribute to a feeling of success, alleviating some initial anxieties.

### ***Expressions of tentativeness***

Although these HE lecturers demonstrated a growth in confidence, as they completed their research and implemented changes in their teaching practice, there was evidence of tentativeness and caution demonstrated in the language used to reflect on their experiences. Words such as "exposure," "hesitancy," and "unfamiliarity" were often used to describe both the experience of submitting their initial funding bids, and also, the idea of writing for a public audience. Given their professional profiles, this was not unexpected, as engaging in research and wider HE practices has been recognised as a time of uncertainty (Harrison & McKeon, 2010). It also indicated the wider changes to their identities, as they reconciled their previous experiences and expectations with those of a HE lecturer. Interestingly, the nature of their tentativeness appeared to relate to their ambitions. For those who sought to undertake research, enhance their practice and engage in what *they* perceived as HE-activities, the sense of tentativeness disappeared when they reflected on their achievements. However, for those lecturers whose research led on to further inquires, and those who wished to push themselves further in terms of their research outputs, the use of tentative language persisted, although it was more focused around specific tasks.

### ***Writing as a transformative and reflective space?***

Engaging in research demonstrated the accessibility of the academy to lecturers with diverse experiences. Rather than solely being consumers of knowledge, they have become producers, who

were beginning to share their knowledge with the wider community. As Henkel (2005) discusses, membership to wider communities is integral to the identities of academics. In the case of this group, adopting the perceived behaviour and practices of academics appeared essential in their acceptance of themselves as *legitimate* HE professionals. Interestingly, expression of this acceptance emerged from the narratives in various ways. It appeared that the process of writing, peer review and discussion allowed them to revisit their experiences and reflect upon them in relation to the wider changes taking place within English HE. In this sense, the writing group served not only to support their ongoing development, but was also a transformational space. Given the lack of recognition from many of their host institutions, self validation through writing was particularly important in self recognition and in sustaining their commitment to their professional development and research. Equally, it allowed the lecturers to develop new conceptualisations of their research and teaching practices, which led in turn to the emergence of further inquiries. For all members of the writing group the process of reflecting through writing, was a means rather than an end, which formed the basis of future research projects and scholarly endeavours.

## References

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